

COMMENTARY

Secretary Clinton's Africa Trip

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Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's Africa trip, August 3 to 14, features a tough and demanding agenda: she will be visiting dangerously conflicted Kenya, Congo, and Nigeria; holding a brief exchange with a Somali transition government close to succumbing to a radical Islamist movement affiliated with al Qaeda; reassuring unsteady postwar Liberia; and opening a dialogue with a newly formed government in South Africa, which confronts worsening internal economic strains and remains visibly befuddled by the continuing crisis in neighboring Zimbabwe. The secretary's agenda bears little resemblance to President Bill Clinton's spring 1998 Africa renaissance tour or the similarly optimistic tones of President George W. Bush's summer 2003 and spring 2008 trips.

Secretary Clinton's trip unfolds early in the administration—just after President Barack Obama's governance speech of July 10 in Ghana, just after the president's rollout of an impressive global food security effort at the G-8, and not long after the president unveiled the \$63-billion, six-year Global Health Initiative in May. The secretary's trip has the obvious potential to accelerate progress on all three of these important policy fronts. There are a few other reasons to be hopeful that the trip may help advance U.S. interests in Africa, as well.

Although Secretaries of State Madeleine Albright, Colin Powell, and Condoleezza Rice all injected themselves into Africa at key moments, none really sought to assert the primacy of the secretary's office in driving U.S. policy engagement in Africa forward on a sustained basis.

Secretary Clinton may choose to move in that direction, within the limits of her job, and may be signaling through the scope and timing of her trip that Africa has graduated into a mainstream U.S. foreign policy priority and that she intends to guide that policy. If sustained, that would be a significant shift and a very welcome change. It could begin to right the imbalances of the past that favored the military and other security agencies over our diplomats. It could empower Assistant Secretary of State Johnnie Carson, a seasoned and respected diplomatic strategist, to become the true day-to-day front edge of U.S. policy.

More than any of her predecessors, Secretary Clinton has a proven passion for development and considerable first-hand experience. She has already staked out the lead position within the Obama administration in directing that there be greater coherence, unity of effort, and direction to multiple U.S. foreign assistance streams. And Africa is where the need is most urgent for such a change. The Bush era created important new platforms for U.S. influence in Africa—AFRICOM, PEPFAR, PMI, and MCC—but no clear plan for how a whole-of-government approach is to be achieved.

A critical related point is that the State Department's African Affairs Bureau is chronically weak and neglected, as was recently detailed in a harsh internal review. Similarly, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is widely acknowledged to have been hollowed out over the years and is ill-prepared to execute major new initiatives in rural development and health. One measure of success for the secretary's trip: whether it generates a truly serious, sustained effort to rebuild both the African Affairs Bureau and USAID.

Two twists deserve special mention. The stop in Angola is long overdue. High-level U.S.-Angola bilateral contact has withered over the past decade, even as Angola's significance to global energy markets and to southern Africa's stability have risen. The trip offers the chance to talk in concrete terms about building cooperation in governance, health, the security of coastal fisheries, and peacekeeping. Angolans respond to serious high-level dialogue. That has been missing for a very long time and may now be possible again. Let's test what can come of the renewal of ties.

It is bold that the secretary has chosen to visit Goma in wrecked eastern Congo to put a spotlight on pervasive rape and other forms of violence directed at women and girls. She has shaped the trip to give reality to her claim that gender should occupy a new priority place in U.S. foreign policy.

One final thought: in judging the secretary's Africa trip and its outcomes, it is important that expectations be kept in check and that realism, patience, and a long-term view prevail. Many of the places where the secretary can extend a hand, offer a new dialogue, and lay down new tests are not necessarily ripe for change in the near term nor capable today of grasping the nettle. They need to be worked quietly and seriously over time.

Nigeria, for example, is in deep crisis and near breakdown, evinced by violent chaos and rampant criminality in the Niger Delta, violent radical Islamists confronting authorities across the north, a dysfunctional center with little popular legitimacy, and core finances in free-fall. We need to engage, be candid and tough-minded, offer our advice and assistance, and try to get the Nigerian government to come to terms with reality. But our leverage remains limited, and for the moment we have no ready reliable partners. We have to play a long game, build new linkages within Nigeria, and take action outside Nigeria to halt grand-scale theft of oil and extensive arms trafficking.

South Africa, also, seeks to repair a bilateral relationship that has fallen on the rocks in recent years. But it is a government that is inwardly absorbed, anxious about its economic future, and not yet, it appears, determined to take strategic action to remove the henchmen surrounding Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe from the scene—a pivotal precondition to averting a worsening crisis and opening the door to a durable renewal of democratic governance and reconstruction of Zimbabwe's economy. The secretary is very unlikely to win a breakthrough from South Africa on coming to terms with Mugabe. But she can reinforce what is at stake in Zimbabwe and open a new dialogue about avoiding a hard crash.

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